

Killing changed Memphis

By Mark Mayfield
USA TODAY

MEMPHIS — As ceremonies nationwide mark the 25th anniversary of Martin Luther King's death, a group of aging men quietly mourn anew.

They were among the 1,300 striking sanitation workers whom King had come to Memphis to stand with in 1968. Today many still speak of his death as a raw, personal loss.

"He died for us. You can't ask more of a man than that," says Leroy Bonner, now 81, who was among those workers.

In the aftermath of King's murder, many have tried to measure the effect of his life, and what followed. Perhaps nowhere did judgment weigh heavier than in Memphis.

Says National Civil Rights Museum executive director Juanita Moore: "The whole scorn of the world was on Memphis, just like Dallas after John Kennedy's death. But Memphis had another problem Dallas didn't — the race issue."

Many racial barriers have been broken. The city now has a black mayor and a black majority on the school board, and is one seat shy of a black majority on the City Council.

Yet problems persist. Blacks — 55% of Memphis' 610,000 population — are often poor. The average per capita income of blacks is \$6,982, compared with \$17,569 for whites.

The ongoing federal bank fraud retrial of Rep. Harold Ford, the state's only black member of Congress, raised new tensions. As a result, black leaders threatened a petition drive to ask the National Football League to reject Memphis' bid for a franchise.

Says Herman Ewing, head Memphis' Urban League: "Memphis has changed, but relative to the amount of time that has passed since Martin Luther King's death, we haven't changed nearly as

much as we should have."

In 1968, some of King's aides opposed the trip to Memphis. But many residents say his presence changed their lives.

"The strike gave the African-American community a strong sense of self-esteem," says Rosie Phillips Bingham, a college administrator whose father was among the strikers.

Leroy Bonner, who made less than \$2 an hour when the strike began, says wages improved and backbreaking conditions stopped when the strike ended — after King's death.

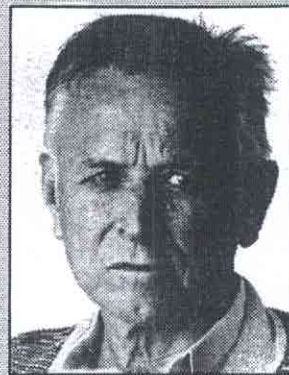
"If it hadn't been for him, I'd be gone now. The work would have just killed me," says Bonner. "He helped us in more ways than he did know."

Anniversary events, TV

► In Memphis, a march downtown Saturday and symposium at the National Civil Rights Museum.

► In Atlanta, communion services Sunday and wreath laying at King's tomb.

► In New York on Sunday, 50,000 expected at Beloved Community March; children asked to turn in toy guns for apples and books.



JAMES EARL RAY

On television

► *At the River I Stand*, PBS, 10 p.m. ET/PT Friday, a documentary on the Memphis sanitation strike.

► *Guilt or Innocence: The Trial of James Earl Ray*, HBO, 8 p.m. ET/PT Sunday. (Review of the mock trial, interview with Ray, 3D)